

# Trooper's Love

written by Calle Dybedahl

This is a story motivated by a posting by Ika on Freedom City, saying that if someone wrote a Thania/Kasabi story she'd write a story with the pairing of choice of the perpetrator of the T/K story. So I wrote this, just so I could ask her to write me some f/f stuff (I think I asked for Jenna/Dayna) :-)

There's not very much *Blake's 7* in this story, really. You can read and enjoy it without ever having seen the series, although the frame story will make a bit more sense if you've seen at least "Pressure Point" and "Trial". There is some sex in it, but you can safely skip it without missing any plot, should you so wish.

**Featured fandoms:** Blake's 7

**Featured pairings:** Kasabi/Thania

**A.S.S Story codes:** ff

**Story rating:** NC17

*Sometimes, random chance can turn the most minor decision into something much bigger. Call it fate, if you will. Call it bad luck. We may live in a rotating steel ring in deep space, but Lady Luck is still with us, and she is still fickle. Decide that, after reading reports for far too many hours, the officers' mess hall is too far away. Throw the uniform jacket on the bunk, put on a black top with no insignia and go eat in the enlisted's mess instead. Not strictly allowed, but the men pretend not to see the rank stripes on your pants when you enter, and soon enough they've forgotten you're there. So they talk.*

*They talk as they talk when the officers aren't listening, as they talk when they think only they and others like them can hear. They tell each other things, things they aren't supposed to know. They tell each other things that you aren't supposed to know either. They say there's a new prisoner in the brig's political wing. They say it's Kasabi. You're not hungry any more.*

*No, that's wrong. You're still hungry, but a lead weight just fell into your stomach and you cannot eat. Same effect, different feeling.*

In a trooper's club on Kilimanjaro Spaceport, Trooper Second Class Thania was stoned. Scented smoke and holographic effects drifted through the room, psychoactive music filled the atmosphere with a hectic feeling of having fun. Sweaty, well-trained bodies moved everywhere, dancing with impossibly acrobatic movements, buoyed by concealed gravitic plates of varying strength. The better you knew the place, the better you could dance, the better you could impress potential partners. Not many were any good, but then, most potential partners didn't need much impressing. Momentary release from stress and mortal fear is a marvelous aphrodisiac. Thania had lost count of how many glasses of Synaesthazine she'd had, but she was quite sure it was too many. She could taste the colours of the holographics, which was always a bad sign. For some values of bad. She decided to switch to something else, and started towards the bar. A patch of Logic, perhaps. Logic meshed quite interestingly with Synaesthazine.

Someone dancing smashed into her, and she smashed her knee into a table. The pain smelled like metallic roses burning. She tried to turn and see who had hit her, and while she turned her knee gently bent. Before she quite understood what was happening, she was lying in somebody's lap. Somebody was warm and soft and hard like a gently playing brook. "Oh, *darling*, where have you been all my life?" she heard someone say. She meant to reply, but before she could form the words the lap's owner bent down and kissed her like a velvet-black summer night's sky. She liked the feeling. When the kissing lips tried to withdraw, she put her arms around the associated neck and held on. Laughter came from several places around her and fell on her skin like white-hot snowflakes.

"That's what you wanted, isn't it, Kasabi? She sure looks your type," someone said.

The kissing mouth disappeared and was replaced by a face that looked like angels singing. "Didn't expect quite so much enthusiasm, though," the face smiled at her. "Who are you, my pretty? And are your eyes really supposed to do that?"

"I think I've had a bit too much," ran out of her mouth. "You're beautiful. Dance with me."

"Delighted to. What is it you've been drinking?"

"Synaesthazine. My favourite. You like it?" The angel helped her stand up. The knee had stopped smelling, and she had little problem standing. Sensations bombarded her from all directions, but somehow she still managed to focus on her angel.

"Never tried it. What does it do?"

"Cross-connects your senses. You look like a very beautiful song, and you smell the most delicate shade of red. Try it?" Even as she asked she signaled a waiter for two glasses.

"Well, you certainly seem to be having fun, so, sure."

Thania laid her arms softly around the angel's neck and led her onto a low-gravity plate. They danced, slowly, gently, grabbing the glasses from the waiter as it passed them by. Thania knew that she shouldn't be having any more, her perceptions were already far more messed up than was good for her, but she didn't care. Tomorrow was far away, and return to duty days after that, an eternity away. "Wow, that's weird," the angel's voice caressed her gently. She pressed herself closer against her.

"You look like the smell of a spring morning just after sunrise," the angel said with wonder in her voice.

"Told you you'd like it," Thania said. "You should try having sex while on it some time." Her senses were turning into a jumble, crossing and re-crossing and crossing yet again. The angel ran her hands over her back, which started out smelling like clean sheets fresh from the laundry and ended up tasting of fine red wine.

"Some time like now?", she said, nibbling on Thania's ear lobe.

"Now is nice," she said, breathless from the crystal green colour in her ear. "I have a room in the back."

Slowly, urgently, they danced their way across the club, hands roaming freely over each other and clothes coming loose.

"I have no idea who you are," the woman beside her in the bed said. "For some reason that doesn't really bother me."

Thania felt vaguely disconnected from the world, as if she experienced everything through a thin sheet of a glass, and she had some problems concentrating. Synaesthesia hangover, it'd pass in a few hours or so. "I don't know who you are either, so we're even there," Thania said. "This is my room, isn't it?"

"Think so. It's not mine, anyway. The name's Kasabi."

Thania thought hard for a moment. "No it isn't, my name's Thania," she said.

The other woman laughed. "My name is Kasabi. Pleased to meet you, Thania."

"Oh. Right." She propped herself up on her elbows and shook her head in an attempt to clear it. Her memories of the night were strangely clear. A side effect of the synaesthesia that she'd never quite managed to decide if she liked or not. "There's no food here, so we'll have to go out somewhere for breakfast, I'm afraid."

Kasabi smiled at her in a strange, secretive way. "Fine," she said. "I know a place nearby."

The place was a half-floor below the street. Through the window Thania could see the legs of people walking outside. She ate her sausages slowly, drank her tea very carefully and tried not to look like she was staring at Kasabi. "Do you come here often?" she asked, and winced internally once she heard what she'd said.

"Almost every time I'm on leave on Earth," Kasabi said. "It's not all that good really, but it's consistent, near the club and usually not crowded." She made a face and waved her hand at the room in general. "Which may very well be because of the decor."

Thania looked around. Bare walls of a uniform sterile brown colour, hard floor, uncomfortable chairs, worn tables. Terrible acoustics, and a smell of fried food that

must be ingrained in the walls. "It looks like a mess hall," she said.

"Probably why I like it," Kasabi said. "It feels like home."

They both laughed, and for a moment that seemed to last forever their eyes met. Thania looked away. "I suppose you have to go back to your ship," she said, and as she said it she felt a twinge of fear inside.

"No, I'm free for another couple of days," Kasabi replied. "But you must have plans," she didn't quite ask.

"No, nothing. I don't have that many friends. You know, military life, moving around a lot."

They ate in silence for a while. There was some noise from the other guests, but overall it was surprisingly silent for a room with no echo dampening at all. "I feel like taking a walk," Thania said. "Get my circulation going. Shouldn't have drunk so much 'aesthezine last night."

"A walk sounds nice. And I think you drank just about the right amount." Kasabi smiled a somewhat nervous smile.

Thania put her fork down. "I don't want any more food. You?"

"No. Let's go".

Kilimanjaro Spaceport wasn't the best place in the Universe to go for a walk, but it was far from the worst either. And even if it had been the best, Thania would've been hard pressed to notice. Just *looking* at Kasabi made her heart speed up, and when she tried to talk to her her brain shut down. Which was exceptionally silly, considering that she'd just spent half a night having sex with her. They walked along the rim of the main takeoff plate. In theory, they weren't allowed to be there, but as long as they had sense enough to stay away from any actual takeoffs nobody would care. They were military, and as such could do things that'd mean deportation for civilians. A thin and chill wind blew up along the side of the mountain, and Thania wished she'd put on something warmer than the thin, baggy shirt she was wearing. Moving further inwards on the huge metal plate would lessen the winds, but it'd also mean not seeing the view nearly as well. And the view certainly was worth seeing.

Built near the top of the mountain and sticking out several miles to the side, one could see forever from the rim of it. Straight down was mostly the metal and concrete of Kilimanjaro Habitat, but outwards was Africa. Green, alive and for centuries untouched by human hand. It looked inviting, but there were still things from the old wars waiting out there. Things that even the Federation military didn't know how to deal with.

"Don't you sometimes wish you could go down there?" she said.

"I've been there," Kasabi answered.

"You have? When? How?"

"A couple of years ago. Just another attempt to see if it had got any safer. I was in the base camp, near the edge of the interdicted zone. When the people in the far team started dying by the dozen, I ran. Didn't even see the bloody Adad that did them in."

They walked in silence for a while. It looked like Kasabi was remembering old unpleasantness, and Thania regretted that she'd brought the subject up. "Did you get badly punished for running?" she asked, unable to think of anything better to break the silence with.

"They didn't punish us at all, actually. We all knew it was all but a suicide mission, and they were pretty glad that some of us returned to tell the story."

"Adad is a strange name, isn't it? I wonder where it comes from."

"It comes from wherever military acronyms come from, as far as I know. I was told it's short for area-denial autonomous drone. I have no idea if that's true or not."

"Fits the bill, though."

"Yeah."

Kasabi stopped and sat down right at the edge. Thania placed herself at her side, just a little too close. Her heart raced, she thought she could feel the heat radiating from the other woman's skin. "There's a kind of poetic justice to it, I think," Kasabi said. "The only habitable planet where we can't do as we wish on the surface is the one we originally came from. It's like a reminder of what we can do if we go wrong, a bogeyman in our racial wardrobe."

Couple of days, she'd said. Just a couple of days until they'd have to part. The thought of parting filled her stomach with a cold dread, and before she'd consciously thought about she'd laid her head on Kasabi's shoulder. Kasabi put an arm around her waist and pulled her a little closer, and while the dread didn't go away it got mixed with warm content. "Do you want to go back to your room?" Kasabi asked.

"Eventually," she replied. "Let's just sit here for a while. I really do love the view."

The wind blew up from the jungle, carrying no hint of the lethal legacy from the past that dwelled there. Above, screams from starships' engines proclaimed where humanity ruled now.

Thania lay in her bed, her head resting on Kasabi's shoulder. She was relaxed, enjoying the warmth and slowly stroking her new lover's skin when someone knocked on the door. "Go away!" she shouted, hoping it'd be heard through the door.

"Excuse me, miss," someone shouted back from outside, "but I'm looking for Captain Kasabi and I've been told she's here. Can I talk to her, please?"

*Captain* Kasabi?! She looked up at the other woman face, and found it wearing an embarrassed expression.

"You're an officer?" she said, not quite believing it. "Why didn't you *say* something? This could get me killed!"

Kasabi didn't meet her eyes. "There wasn't a good time..."

"Last night would've been pretty good!"

"Well, yes. But you were so funny and so beautiful I just couldn't." She abruptly got out of the bed and started to put her clothes on. "Look, it'll be all right. I'll *make* it all right." A hesitation, a stumble in the confident voice. "If you don't mind."

Of course I don't mind, she thought. I love you. Trooper's love, they call it -- strikes fast, strikes hard, dies young. Make it all right. Make it so that we can be together for however short a time we live. "Whatever," she said.

The man outside the door knocked again. "Hold on, lieutenant, I'm coming!" Kasabi said loudly. "Goodbye, Thania," she said, much more mildly. "I didn't wish for it to end like this. I really didn't."

Thania turned over on her side, her back to Kasabi. She didn't say anything, and after a short while she heard the door open and close.

When Thania got back to her ship, her sergeant told her that her application for infiltration and assassination training had been approved. This surprised her somewhat, since she'd never made such an application. "Never figured you for a sneak," the sergeant said. "But then, you wouldn't be any good if you looked like one, would you?"

Briefly she thought about protesting, telling him that someone somewhere had got the wrong name. "Here's your new insignia," he went on. "The ship's pretty full, so it

seems you'll have to share a cabin with another ensign."

She looked at the badges he'd handed her. "What?" she said. "What cabin?"

He looked at her, and a slight smile lightened his normally grim face. "You really didn't know?" he said. "Well, I'll be damned. That must be a first." He took a couple of steps to the side and motioned for her to follow, so they wouldn't block the entry hatch. "It's like this, kid," he went on, "Infiltration and assassination is an assignment where you'll need to have access to a lot of secret information. So, it's an assignment that's only open to officers. Since no normal officer would want an assignment that's as bloody dangerous as sneaking, they solve the problem by making everyone they accept for sneak training an officer. And officers live in cabins up on officer's deck, Ensign Thania, not down here on barracks deck with us grunts."

"Oh. I see," she said. "What happens if you fail or don't complete the training?"

"You don't fail or drop out of sneak training. You finish it, or you die trying. Good luck, sir. A ship will be docking with us in a couple of days to pick you up."

He made a not even slightly mocking salute to her and left. Only seconds later, she could hear him shouting at someone for being too slow. She already missed it.

*You return to your room and get the old trunk out of the wardrobe. You pull at a special place in the lining, and a sheet of invisibly thin biofilter fabric comes loose. Quickly stripping naked, you carefully wrap the fabric around you before you put on a plain uniform with ensign's markings on it. Strictly speaking, wearing other markings than those of your own rank is against regulations, but common enough in practice. People doesn't always want to announce who they are, and markings lower than your usual ones makes it easy for others to pretend not to know who you are. It gets to be an ingrained reaction, and pretty soon they **don't** know who you are. Other places in the trunk produce tools, tools you'd be really hard put to explain possessing. Tools that wouldn't get you a court-martial, that'd be far too public. They'd get you a quick trip out an airlock without a breather. But you once made sure to forget to turn them in, suspecting that something like this might one day happen.*

*You look them over carefully. It's been years since you last used them, and something may have stopped working since then. But once your fingers start moving over the control surfaces all the old habits surface again. At first, it goes slowly. Compcomm protocol analyzer and inducer. Alarm inhibitor. Protein scanner. Neural overloader. More things, many more things, your fingers moving over them faster and faster, checking that they work and placing them in their predetermined places in your uniform.*

*Then you're ready. You still look like your ordinary old self. But you no longer leave any traces whatsoever, not a single organic molecule. There isn't a security system in the Federation that you can't bypass, and you can kill so fast and so discreetly that it'll take a full forensic autopsy to tell it wasn't natural. Briskly, but not so fast that it'll bring suspicion, you move down the levels to the storerooms. There is an unused one in the back, empty now and not due to be used for another few months. What the room itself holds is of little use to you, but all storerooms have a linkup to the station computer. So has your own room, of course. But your security penetration tools do leave some traces, so it's best to use a linkup that can't be traced to you. You have some orders to give to the logistics system, orders your superiors really wouldn't approve of.*

The dropship entered the atmosphere. Turbulent air tore at its hull, generating noise at

levels she felt more than heard. The temperature in the hold rose rapidly, but she couldn't tell if it was heat that bled in from the red-hot outer hull or just that of a lot of people in a small space. "Two minutes to first drop altitude," the comm in her helmet crackled.

She was sixth in line, so she'd drop one minute fifteen seconds after they reached the highest safe altitude. Thirty seconds later the last trooper was supposed to go out the hatch, and another fifteen seconds later the ship would drop under lowest safe altitude and start accelerating out again. "Sound off, by numbers," the lieutenant's voice came over the comm, less crackly than the pilot.

"One, go!"

She didn't know his name. The entire course he had only been One. "Two, go!"

None of them had names here. None of them had histories. All they had was numbers. "Three, go!"

For the first two weeks they hadn't been allowed to see each other outside of training sessions. Once they were allowed to meet, they were instructed to keep their identities secret. They were also told that one of them was an instructor out to get them to reveal themselves. If they did, they failed the course, and failure meant death. "Five, go!"

Number Four had turned out to be a pursuit ship pilot, originally from Arctica Dome. Two guards held him down outside the sanitation unit while a third one shot him in the back of the head. "Seven, go!"

They never found out what happened to number six. One morning he just wasn't there any more. Some thought he'd been the undercover instructor, some thought he'd been executed. Thania thought the second alternative was the more likely one. "Eight, go!" she yelled into her mike after checking that all the telltales projected at the inside of her visor glowed green.

She had a very vague idea how long she'd been at the training center, and no idea at all about where it was. There were no windows or viewports, no fresh air. Lights went on and off at varying intervals, training sessions went from just a few hours to what felt like several days. Once, Thania and another ensign tried throwing a ball to each other in various directions to see if they could spot coriolis effect. The results, of course, were inconclusive. They might be on a planet, or they might be on a very large space station. There was simply no way to tell. "Nine, go!"

Outdoors exercises were held in huge chambers with artificial environments, so that the teachers could have complete control of the circumstances. They didn't want students dying unnecessarily. The people they trained on were criminals who knew even less about where they were and why than the students did. At first, Thania found it hard to kill them in cold blood, but she soon got over that. They were, after all, just civilians. "Ten, go!"

"All go, exit as countdown indicates."

Much of the training was done under hypnosis, making it possible to learn in days skills that would otherwise take years to master. She wasn't even sure exactly what they had been teaching her. At times, she'd find herself confidently just doing things she had no idea she could do. She had a vague feeling that this ought to distress her, but somehow it didn't. The noise from outside had lessened considerably, and it was comparatively silent for a few moments until the exit hatch opened. One jumped out. Seventy-five seconds until she'd do the same. Seventy-five seconds until she'd see a planet's surface again. Seventy-five seconds, and she'd be free again, if only for a short time.

The planet below was Adrannen, which used to be one of the most important members of the Federation. Some thirty years ago, it had tried to revolt and declare itself independent. The Federation military had put a stop to that, of course. If it had been a less important planet, it would have ended there. But Adrannen was a high-class world, rich and prosperous. The sort of place other, less lucky, worlds looked up to and aspired to be like. The President decided to make an example out of them.

He gave the planet to the military to use as it liked. Everyone living on it was declared a traitor, and sentenced to enslavement followed by death. Everything that the military wanted to do, they could do at Adrannen. They tested weapons. They let troopers at large loose on the civilians without any restrictions at all. And they used it as proving ground for their assassins. Number seven stepped forward and jumped. After he dropped away, she could see out, see ocean and forest and clouds. She wished that she could feel and smell it too, that she wasn't stuck in a thick technological cocoon. Any fear she'd had of falling, of jumping out into a nightmare of turbulence and unforgiving gravity, it all went away in the blink of an eye. She stepped up to the edge, and when the countdown reached the right time, she stepped out into the air.

Thania put her cup of cold, brown liquid down on the table before her and looked for the waiter. It was time for her to leave. She'd seen quite enough of life in the town square, and she felt confident that it'd be no hindrance to her mission. "Check, please," she said when the waiter came within earshot. He nodded and left again.

Three more days of this. She sighed. It'd be hard to give it up. In spite of its fearsome reputation, it turned out that most parts of Adrannen were quite civilized. There were only so many troopers here at any given time, and the rest of the planet was left to itself. Since they had very good reason not to want to attract attention, the anarchic countryside was a good deal calmer and more safe than most domes on Earth. The irony appealed to her. In trying to create a living hell, the Federation had managed to create a reasonable facsimile of paradise. The waiter returned with the slip of paper telling her how much she owed. She dropped some local currency on the table. It didn't matter how much she left, she had more than enough. But too blatant generosity would make them remember her, and being remembered was a cardinal sin.

She took the long way back to her rented room. Through winding alleys, across small squares with children playing and old men drinking in them, along dusty streets where laundry dried on lines strung between buildings, it was a world out of time for someone born on Earth. Heat came from the sun, not from climate control systems. Air came from all around and carried smells of forest and cooking, not from recyclers carrying smells of chemicals and human breath. Her room was small, a barely converted attic overlooking the town square. The only obvious way to reach it was by some rickety wooden stairs mounted haphazardly on the back wall of the building. It was cheap, hot and perfect for Thania's needs. It held nothing but a narrow bed, a small table with uneven legs, a wooden chair, a washstand and a small barrel of water. To this, she had added a dull black sniper rifle with external-feed targeting system, mounted on a motorized remote-controlled tripod.

The first day after she'd rented the room, she had surveyed the town and found the spot where her target would appear. The second, third and fourth day, she learned the movements of the town square. The fifth day, she bought a lot of food that wouldn't spoil, in many batches from many different places. She mounted microscopic camer-

as in several places, so she'd get ample warning before her target reached the town square. By the sixth day, there was nothing left to do but wait. She lay on her bed in a light trance, watching the monitors she'd placed on the ceiling above. Occasionally, she'd eat. When she suddenly heard someone cough politely right beside her bed, she all but jumped out of her skin.

"I can't believe you got right into my room like that!"

Kasabi smiled. "I've been doing this sort of thing for a while now," she said. "You may be good, but you're still on your exam run. Experience counts for a lot."

"I guess it does," Thania laughed.

They were sitting on a flat piece of roof beside and above Thania's attic, looking out over the town. Most of what they saw was other roofs, but there was the occasional glimpse of a street or a back yard, and in the distance there was the forest. Sunshine beat down at them, and the roof smelled of dust and hot, dry wood. "So why don't you share some more of your ample experience?" she asked, running her hand gently down Kasabi's trouser-clad thigh.

Kasabi raised an eyebrow at the touch, but made no move to prevent it. "You certainly seem to have changed your mind since we parted on Earth," she said.

"Well, you did make it all right," Thania answered. "We're both officers now."

"I'm still your superior."

"So we'll both get reprimanded if we're discovered by someone who cares. That's a long way from getting shot."

Kasabi laid back, smiling. "Aren't you afraid your target will appear while you're occupied?"

Thania turned over, so she lay on her side supporting herself on her elbow. "He could do that while I'm sleeping just as well. Shouldn't matter. His signature is in the rifle, as soon as he walks through the door of the town hall, it'll fire."

Kasabi had dressed in local style. Pale blue trousers clung tight to her legs, brown leather boots covered her feet, a thick and billowing white blouse hid her torso from Thania's gaze. Her hair had grown longish and moved slowly as wind stalked along the roof. Suddenly unable to resist the temptation, Thania bent down the last little bit and kissed her. She felt Kasabi's lips open under hers, her arms embracing her and pulling her down. Tongue played against tongue and she felt alive, so alive. Her breasts flattened against Kasabi's, her hands found their way to Kasabi's head, cradling it, feeling its weight and cushioning from the hard wood. There was no one to see them. No watching cameras, no spying neighbours, no curious strangers. No one here knew them, no one here waited for them, no one here expected anything of them. There was nothing but the living heat of the unshielded sunshine, the smells of the sleepy town, the happy cries of playing children, and themselves.

Thania broke the kiss and sat up, still on top of the older woman. She could hear herself breathe heavily, her heart beat as if she'd been running for miles and she suspected she was blushing heavily. Not that she cared. At the moment, she felt more free than she ever had before. She felt like she could do anything, anything at all, and get away with it. Hesitation, the need to plan out every move, it all had gone away and been replaced with impulses. All that was was now. She grabbed the hem of her tightly clinging shirt and pulled it over her head and off in a single smooth move. Warm wind caressed her skin, moving across her back and tickling her sides. A pair of callused hands complemented the wind on the side it couldn't reach, sliding over her belly and ending up cupping her breasts. "I never asked why you are here," she

whispered.

Kasabi moved her hands, gently rubbing Thania's nipples with her palms. "This is where you are. Isn't that reason enough?"

"You know what I mean." She started to undo Kasabi's blouse.

Her hands kept moving, roaming over her naked skin. "I found out when your exam would be. I got some leave at that time. I fiddled a bit with the system to make sure you got a target area I knew well. I went here."

"Naughty girl," Thania said and bent down to let her tongue play over a just exposed nipple. She kept it up, alternating teasingly circling the it with gentle bites. She could hear Kasabi's breath become irregular, gasps coming in time with the strokes of her tongue and nips of her teeth. After a short while, she felt Kasabi push at her head, down towards her belly. She smiled and started kissing her way down there, caressing soft warm skin with her lips.

When she reached the top of Kasabi's trousers, she stopped, confused for a moment. Annoyed, she started undoing the buttons. Kasabi laughed and tried to help, but only managed to get the trousers all tangled up with her still tied shoes. "Easy," Thania said. "Be still. Let me." She turned around, breathed deeply and tried to calm herself down enough to manage the difficult task of untying a pair of shoes. Somehow, she managed it and she had them nearly halfway undone when she felt her own tights being gently pulled down. A hand slid up the inside of her thigh, gently stroked her pussy. She lost all the concentration she'd managed to work up and just pulled the shoes the rest of the way off, quickly followed by trousers and socks. The hand between her legs became more insistent, pushing in between her labia. She turned over, forcing Kasabi's hand away, and quickly removed the rest of her own clothing.

She moved back on top of Kasabi. "I think... I was... about *here*..." she said, putting her lips back just below her love's navel. As she started to move downwards again Kasabi spread her legs wide, giving her room to sit between them, making it possible for her to caress her thighs, letting her hands and her mouth slowly work towards the same hot, wet goal.

Softly, teasingly, she kissed the skin at each side of Kasabi's sex, licked it, her hands keeping her legs wide apart. Softly, teasingly she breathed deeply and blew at the blood-engorged, sensitive flesh. Not until she heard Kasabi groan and felt her try to push herself closer did she actually touch her pussy, but then she did aggressively, pushing her tongue into it as far as she could in one motion, moving it quickly up and down along the slit. Kasabi made a sound that was equal parts gasp and outcry and her entire body tensed. Thania smiled internally. She let her mouth concentrate on the hard bud near the top of the wet folds and let a finger play with the hole further down.

She forgot time. She forgot the hot sun. All that was was the feeling of her lover next to her, and a sense of happiness that she could bring her such pleasure. She explored as far inside Kasabi as her fingers could reach, finding spots that produced louder gasps and more delighted cries than others. Filled with a sudden urgent need to feel all of the other woman's body at once, she moved from her position crouching between her legs and lay down by her side, fingers still sliding in and out of her vagina. Her arm under Kasabi's neck, they kissed, she languishly and Kasabi with desperate need. Kasabi's hand covered the one she held between her legs, urging her to move it faster, harder. She did so, trying to hit those sensitive spots inside. She pressed down at the top of Kasabi's sex with the heel of her hand, pressed and rubbed as hard as she dared. Kasabi's entire body suddenly tensed. The hand she held over Thania's pushed almost painfully hard. She let out a strangely muted cry, and her

body shuddered all over for a few moments before she relaxed like a dropped rag doll. Thania stroked her face, sad and happy at the same time.

"Your turn now," Kasabi said when she'd regained her breath. She gently pushed Thania down onto her back. Without the slightest hesitation or reservation, Thania relaxed and gave up control. She closed her eyes when she felt a hot mouth on her breast at the same time as a couple of fingers entered her so very wet and ready vagina.

"I love you," she whispered, not caring if Kasabi heard or not.

The mouth left her nipple, which suddenly felt cold in spite of the hot summer air. "I love you too," she heard. "I have no idea why, but I do so love you."

Then there was, for a time, only bliss.

The mild night air stalked in through the open door and window, bearing with it all the myriad impressions of the town. There was food cooking, flowers blooming, dust settling, animals doing what animals do and that undefinable sense of another planet that never quite went away no matter how long you stayed. Kasabi sat on the bed, cleaning the small gun she usually wore concealed in her belt. Thania knelt beside the sniper rifle's tripod, checking a bearing that the diagnostics claimed didn't move as smoothly as it should. On the table was the remains of a late supper, and in the sky two much too small moons could be seen. The lack of a proper, Earth-size moon on such an Earthlike planet disturbed Thania more than she'd thought it would. Every time she looked up and saw them she was reminded that, no, this wasn't Earth. Really. It wasn't home. No matter how much it looked like it, it wasn't the place where her ancestors had evolved. After some prodding, the diagnostics admitted that the bearing was all right. She went on to the next item, one of the lenses in the barrel that seemed to be slightly misaligned. Not that it mattered, really, as long as she was only firing across a square less than fifty yards wide, but she had the time and you never knew when you'd need your equipment to be in top condition.

It had been three days since Kasabi arrived, and neither of them had gone farther from the room than the bath house in the back yard. A couple of hours ago, her most distant remotes had picked up the noise from a military convoy. If she'd had anything left to prepare, she would've done so then. Half an hour ago, her remotes could see the convoy. Five big, hulking Federation troop transport vehicles. The noise from them utterly destroyed the peaceful mood of the town. She could hear them through the window now. She carefully adjusted the misaligned lens and disconnected the diagnostic tool from the rifle. Making sure that she was well into the room, so she couldn't be easily spotted from outside, she stood up and looked out. The troop transports had taken up positions along the edges of the square. Troopers in their usual baggy black jumpsuits and black visored helmets milled like ants over its stone-laid surface. In theory, they were securing the area. In practice, they were looking for stuff to steal and locals to rape.

A short, pudgy man without a helmet stepped out of the transport that had been first into the square. He stopped to talk to a couple of troopers, who then followed him as he walked towards the town hall. When he got close to the entrance, her rifle started to make soft whirring sounds. She felt Kasabi sidle up next to her and put an arm around her waist. The guards opened the big double doors leading into the town hall, and the pudgy officer stepped through it. The rifle coughed, a sound barely audible inside the room and entirely undetectable outside it. The officer's head blew up, spreading blood, brain and bone fragments for several yards around.

"Congratulations, cadet Thania," Kasabi said. "You pass."

They kissed, briefly but passionately, while the troopers ran around in shock. Then they quickly grabbed their things and left, before someone took command and ordered a competent search.

By the time the sun rose, they were far away from the cosy little town that wasn't all that cosy any longer and well on the way to Thania's designated pickup zone. They'd heard two ships land a couple of minutes earlier, ships that would've carried more troopers brought there to punish the locals. "Did it bother you to kill a fellow trooper?" Kasabi asked while they walked through waist-high ferns.

"No," Thania replied. "He was my target."

"Did it surprise you that your target was an officer and not a local rebel or something?"

She thought about it for a moment before she answered, taking a swig out of her water bottle to cover her hesitation. "No, it didn't," she said. "Although I'm not sure why that is."

Kasabi smiled. It wasn't a very nice smile. "Hypnotic training is great, isn't it?" she said. "The thing about a lawless planet is that there is no law on it. The propaganda wants you to think that that means that you can do anything you want to the locals, have the time of your life. Which is true. What is also true is that pretty much anything can be done to you too -- and there is no law enforcement that will care." She ducked under a low branch. "That could be fixed, of course, if Space Command wanted it to be. It'd be expensive, but it could be done. But they don't want this place to have any law at all, because occasionally they want to discreetly get rid of someone. Having them killed by so-called local resistance on Adrannen is a convenient way to do that. So they make sure there is no law at all."

Somehow, Thania wasn't particularly surprised.

*The heavy white cloak covers you as you walk down the corridor. The padded boots dampen the sound of your steps, the white-haired wig and white grinning mask cover your head. You pass people, but they don't see you. They walk past only inches away from you, yet they pay no attention to you at all. There is nothing mysterious in this. Nothing fancy, no advanced technology or complicated tricks. Just psychology. Nobody wants to see the executioner.*

*You have dressed the part of the Laughing Man, the disguise worn by military executioners when they go to kill a traitor. The traitors does not always know that they've been found out, and there are rumours that some have been found to be innocent after they've already been killed. The Laughing Man makes people nervous. He might be coming for them, guilty or not (but almost all of them are guilty of **something**, of course). So they do their best not to see him. He passes them by, relief floods their little minds and they forget him like last night's nightmares. It's almost as good as being invisible. Years ago, you got hold a genuine Laughing Man suit and you've kept it hidden since then, thinking that some day you might need it. Some day like this.*

*As you walk into the brig the guards look away. The corridors here are empty, its walls featureless white plastic and its doors mirror-finish chrome. The only moving thing is you, gliding forward like ghost, your legs hidden by the voluminous cloak hanging from the built-up shoulders. The Laughing Man is taller and wider than most people. The suit is built that way. That alone makes it very hard to tell who is wearing*

*it. Electronics in the mask and cloak take it the rest of the way and make it impossible.*

*When you reach the door to the control room, the door slides open before you even knock. You stop just outside, looking in. Two guards are sitting there. They are clearly frightened. "There is a prisoner," you say, and your voice comes out clear, melodious and unrecognizable through the mask. "Her name is Kasabi."*

*One of them nods. "Yes," he says. "She's in cell 73A." You can see him sweating, although it is no warmer than usual.*

*"The door will open," you say. "When it has opened, the walls' eyes will not see, the walls' ears will not hear. Do you understand?"*

*This is not normal procedure, not even close. You trust that they have never actually met the Laughing Man before, and that if they have they will not dare question him. For whichever reason, they don't question. They nod that yes, they do understand. Absolutely silent, you turn and walk away, towards Kasabi's cell.*

Unlike most of her fellow officers, Thania liked weather. It didn't matter much what sort of weather it was, as long as it was *real* weather, not something controlled and tamed. She didn't mind that water ran down her neck and got her clothes wet, she didn't mind that mist obscured her vision, she didn't mind slogging through knee-deep snow. It was true, it was real. It made her feel alive, connected to the planet she happened to be on. Her troopers weren't much fond of it, but then, not being fond of what their officers liked was a traditional troopers' pastime. She wiped water off her face and shielded her eyes from the rain with her hand, trying to see where she was. She hadn't been on Treczik more than a few days, and the streets of its capital city were still unfamiliar to her. Which was another reason she'd decided to walk through the pouring rain to the Federation Embassy, she needed to get more familiar with the layout of the city. She had access to the best maps possible, but nothing gave the true gut feeling for the lay of the land like walking over it.

A few blocks up ahead was a building she recognized, and she set off towards it. There wasn't all that many people out on the streets, not because of the weather but because of the fear of terrorist attacks. Thania knew there weren't any terrorist attacks scheduled for the area for at least a couple of weeks, so she didn't worry about it. The street was lined with stone, which was only to be expected as it was quite old and built high up on the side of a mountain. A pretty stupid place to build a city, since the prevailing winds would drive most clouds towards it and the clouds would then release most of their water content over the city as the mountain forced them to rise. But it was a couple of hundred years too late to change that now, the capital had rain for nineteen days out of every twenty and that's how it was. A testament to the bloody-mindedness of humans.

She entered the luxurious lobby of the embassy mansion and tried to get the water off her hair and clothes as well as she could. A servant came up and offered her a towel, which she gratefully accepted. "You're late," a very familiar voice said. She gave the towel back to the servant and looked towards the source of the words.

"I'm sorry, Major," she said, smiling. "I was familiarizing myself with the city."

Kasabi tried to look stern, but failed miserably in spite of her black uniform and crewcut hair. "The ambassador seems to have decided to let us wait anyway. Have you checked the place?"

Thania nodded. "Had a couple of troopers do it this morning. No surveillance stuff except what we've placed here ourselves."

"Good. Let's sit down while we wait, I want you to have a look at a few reports."

Kasabi walked back to the armchair she'd been sitting in when Thania arrived. Thania followed her, admiring her ass all the way.

The ambassador's office would've have had a stunning view if it hadn't been raining. In a splendid example of the drawbacks of just trusting maps and models, the architect who designed it had failed to think of the local climate. What she had thought would be a marvelous view of dramatic mountains was almost always a rather dull view of drops running down windows, backed by solid grey clouds. "Good morning, ambassador," Kasabi said. "I'm Major Kasabi of the political office, and this is my assistant Lieutenant Thania of the Diplomatic Engineering Corps. I hope you have been informed of our presence here?"

The ambassador was a career politician. He was tall, fiftyish, ruggedly handsome and impeccably dressed. "Yes," he said, motioning for them to sit, "I was. You're here to protect the sitting government from the rebels, if I understand correctly?"

Kasabi sat down in a stuffed chair. Thania remained standing behind her. "Yes and no," she said. "We are here to protect them from terrorists, that is true. We are also here to provide some terrorism for them to need protection from."

"All in order to make them depend on us more. Splendid. The embassy will of course support you to the best of our ability."

Kasabi smiled. "I'm glad we understand each other," she said. "To begin with, we would like to have the president's schedule for the next two weeks. We plan to do an assassination attempt on behalf of the local rebels, and we want it to look convincing."

The ambassador looked worried. "He won't be hurt, will he? I rather like the man."

"Don't worry. The protection system you gave him as a gift a couple of months ago is precisely tailored to the weapons we've been selling to the rebels for the past year, which is of course the sort of weapon we will be using. Anything else would look suspicious."

He sighed and folded his hands on the desk. "Frankly, I don't think I want to hear more about this. I'll instruct my secretary to give you any help you need. I hope that will do."

Kasabi's smile widened. "Of course, ambassador. I'll leave our reports with your secretary, and he can pass them on to you if you should change your mind. Thank you for your time, and good day." She stood and started to walk towards the door.

"Just one more small thing, if you have the time, Major?"

Kasabi stopped and turned to him again. "Yes?"

"What's this 'Diplomatic Engineer' thing? I never heard that term before."

"Well, ambassador, you know what combat engineers do? Build bridges, make roads, overcome all sorts of obstacles so that the combat troops can proceed smoothly?"

"Yes, of course I do. I'm not a military man, but I'm not entirely ignorant!"

"Diplomatic Engineers do the same thing for diplomats as the Combat Engineers do for combat troops. They remove obstacles and help things proceed smoothly."

The ambassador looked at Thania. "She's an assassin!" he said.

"No, ambassador," Kasabi said with unnecessary clarity, as if speaking to a child. "Assassins and spies are what our enemies have. *We* have Diplomatic Engineers."

The large black car sped through the rain towards their headquarters. Kasabi was

reading a report, and Thania just sat looking idly out the window. "He's not in on it, is he?" she asked after a while.

"What?" Kasabi said, looking up from her slate. "The ambassador? No, he's a sacrificial."

"Ah. Do we kill him ourselves or just hope that the rebels do it for us?"

"We kill him. We're planning to use his death as one of the primary excuses for taking the military in, so we must be sure he's dead." She turned off the slate and put it aside. "Have you decided how you'll do the president yet?"

Thania grinned. "Yes. I'll use the rebel assassin's rifle, and I'll let the rebel assassin do it for me."

"What?!" Kasabi exclaimed. "Thania, you know you can't modify that rifle! It must be an ordinary rebel weapon, or the plan won't work!"

"Don't worry, love," she said. "I won't touch the rifle. I will touch the bullets a bit, though, to have them carry a neurophage virus tailored to the president's DNA. They're way behind us in biotech, they haven't got a chance of detecting it, much less cure it."

"Ah. And you're certain the bullet will reach him? He will be behind the shield, you know."

"The shield won't stop the bullet, just slow it down enough not to be dangerous. The president will get a nasty bruise along with his fatal disease."

"Well, if you're sure it'll work, I'll trust you."

"Even if it doesn't work all that'll happen is that our schedule will get delayed a bit. If he isn't dead after six hours, I'll go in and kill him myself. All their security hardware they got from us, so I have backdoors and overrides to everything they have. It wouldn't even be a challenge."

"Good, good..." Kasabi nodded distractedly. "Neurophage, you say. That's a pretty nasty way to go, isn't it?"

"We have worse."

She laughed a short, dry laugh. "The Federation justified, short version: it could be worse." She shook her head. "You know, Thania, I think I'll retire from the field after this. All the people we kill, all the societies we destroy, all the suffering we cause, it's starting to get to me."

"You're leaving me?"

"For a time, maybe." She hesitated, looked out the window at the passing houses. "I have a standing offer to teach at the FSA. I'm tempted to take them up on it. I'm sure they'll take you too, if I ask them to."

"And if not, I could come visit. With you at the FSA, at least I could be reasonably sure that you wouldn't die in battle." Thania smiled and slid over to Kasabi, hugged her as well as the cramped back seat allowed. "I'll miss you," she said.

"And I you." Kasabi leaned into the embrace, put a hand on her leg. "But I really can't do this any more. If I go on, eventually I'll follow my conscience and they'll get me for treason. At the FSA, maybe I can get some of the next generation to be less vicious than ours has been."

"You'll be a great teacher," Thania said. "Your students will remember you long after they've graduated from the academy."

They sat like that, holding each other, comforting each other by sheer human presence, for the rest of the ride.

A black-clad trooper appeared in the door. "Sir?" he asked, as if afraid he'd disturb

her.

Almost five hours. The president must have been quite a hardy man to last that long. If the trooper was about to say what she thought he was about to say. "Yes?"

"We just received word from the palace, sir. The president died a few minutes ago."

She looked out through the window. The bushes and grass on the inner yard looked brooding and mysterious in the darkness and rain. Yes, the president had been quite hardy. "Has Major Kasabi been informed?" she asked.

"She has, sir."

"Good. Dismissed."

He left, and Thania was alone. The room was large, having been built at a time when the city was more prosperous than it was now. The walls were covered with murals of faraway places, the floor was covered with a prized sort of red stone. The ceiling was high and full of supposedly decorative stonework, the huge windows filled nearly the entire back wall. The only furniture in it was a huge old desk, her functional but comfortable black chair behind it, two less comfortable chairs for visitors in front of it, a filing cabinet, a table with comms gear and coat-hanger. Suddenly the look of it all depressed her. She got up, got her coat from the hanger and walked out. There were quite a few people moving around in the building, being ready for whatever would happen now that the president had been murdered. She ignored them all, just politely acknowledged their existence and walked on until she was well outside the Federation military compound and into the city.

The streets followed the side of the mountain, winding along in the only way that would keep them level. On the outer side, there were gardens on top of what were the roofs of the buildings on the next street down. On the other side was buildings, the roofs of which held gardens accessible from the next street up. It was a funny way to build, and it required both quite particular geography and quite advanced building techniques. As far as she knew, it was unique in all the settled parts of the galaxy. Unique, as so many other things had been. Unique, until the Federation took over and remolded it into its own way. She could almost see how it would be, the climate controlled to get rid of the rain, the top of the mountain flattened to make way for a proper spaceport. The people living perpetually indoors, cut off from the planet. All had to be the same, or the administrative burden of rigidly controlling it all would become too great. The first habitat would probably be called Treczik Prime, and look exactly like Kilimanjaro Habitat on Earth, right down to the club where she'd first met Kasabi.

"Are you a soldier?" a small voice next to her asked.

She looked down, and saw a girl, perhaps seven or eight years old. "Yes, I am," she answered "How'd you know?"

"My dad said only soldiers walk like you do. We've seen a lot of them today, only they were dressed like people."

Her provocateurs. The girl must be talking about her provocateurs, who had been moving about town all day spreading rumours and preparing to incite riots a few hours after news of the president's death started to spread. The girl's father must be a soldier himself, and a good one, to spot them.

"Where is your father? Should you really be out here by yourself like this? It might be dangerous." To you, because of what I and my troops will do. To me, because if your father told anyone else my plan might not work.

"We live right over there," the girl said and pointed at a garden a bit further along

the street. "I just went out to play while mommy makes dinner."

"I'd like to talk to your father," Thania said. "Could you introduce me to him, perhaps?"

The girl thought about it for a while. "Ok!" she said. "Come!"

She took Thania's hand and led her past a pub, a couple of food stores, an appliance shop to the garden she'd pointed out earlier. It was well kept, full of lovingly tended examples of the local low, rain-loving bushes. Toys and a few gardening tools lay here and there on the grass, waiting for their owners to return to them. In the middle of the garden was the traditional small hut covering the spiral staircase down to the top floor of the house. The path up to it was laid with flat, pale grey stones in an uneven but pleasing pattern. It was a garden people lived in. It was a garden that was loved, even if not thought of that way by its people. It was a *home* in a way no place had ever been to Thania.

The girl opened the door to the stair-hut. "Welcome!" she said. "My dad has said to always say that when strangers enter," she explained.

"Thank you," Thania said. "Is there something special I ought to say to be polite in return?"

She thought about it for a few moments, her childish face contorting slightly with the effort of remembering. "No, I don't think so," she said. "Just be nice."

"Ok," she said. "I'll do my best."

The stairway was clean and slightly worn in a broken-in and comfortable way. The steps were covered with the same fabric she'd seen in buildings all over the city except the Federation-occupied ones. Water-absorbing fabric, she suddenly realized, to prevent rainwater from getting into the house proper. A detail, a small, inconsequential detail that showed how much more the people of the planet belonged here than she did herself. It had never occurred to her or any of the other Federation staff to do more about the rain than they would do anywhere else. Which was stupid, but very much their way. Everywhere was the same, and if it wasn't at the moment, it'd be *made* to be the same. "Mommy, there's a lady here who wants to speak to daddy!"

The stairs ended in a small cloakroom, full of clothes, toys and all the debris a child accumulates. There were doors in three directions, one of which was open and led to a cluttered but clean kitchen. She smelled meat frying, meat and spices she'd never encountered anywhere but here. A woman was at the stove, cooking. She was about Thania's own age, slender but muscular, with short brown hair. She wore comfortable, worn clothes, the sort you wear when you're not expecting anyone outside your family to see. She turned, looked surprised. "Is it about the heating again?" she said. "We thought that was fixed."

"No. I'm sorry to barge in like this, but it might be important. Is your husband home?"

"I'm here," a male voice said, and a man stepped into the kitchen. "What's this all about?" He was tanned, with dark hair. He looked quite fit enough to be military, but his heavy shirt and trousers made it hard to tell for sure.

"Your daughter said you saw a lot of soldiers dressed like civilians earlier today," Thania said.

He looked at her. "I know you. You're a Federation officer. I've seen you in the ambassador's retinue, behind that grim-faced major who looks like she'd like to spit every time the ambassador speaks to her."

With a move so ingrained she hardly even noticed she made it she pulled her gun from its place under her coat and pointed it at his forehead. "Who have you told about

the soldiers?" she said.

He didn't look quite as frightened as he ought to. He had told someone, she was almost sure. In the corner of her eye she saw the woman grab hold of the girl and shove her behind her. "Let my wife and daughter go and I'll tell you," the man said.

"Tell me, and not so many of your people will die," she replied. "Disturbing us now won't save your freedom, only make the takeover more brutal."

"Still, we have to fight."

"Why? What can you possibly hope to gain?"

Why am I doing this? flew through her mind. Why am I arguing with him? Take him in and let the interrogators handle extracting the info. "If nothing else, our dignity. We have to try, or we don't deserve to be remembered."

She didn't want to kill them. She didn't want to destroy them, to take them from their home and make them submit to the will of the Federation. She should, it was her job, she had done it many times before. But it had become too much, too often, too many pleading faces crowding her memory. "Remembered? That's all you want to be? Remembered?" She laughed, short and bitterly. "You won't be remembered, no matter what you do. It doesn't matter if you're brave or cowardly, it doesn't matter if you fight or surrender. The next generation will learn the Federation's version of what happened, and you won't be in it. The only choice you have, the only difference you can make, is in how many of your children will live to learn it."

"Will you let them go?" he asked, eventually.

She could smell the food getting burnt. She could hear them breathing, feel them staring at her. Waiting to see if she'd destroy their lives. Which she should do. She'd done often enough. She should fire her gun -- first at him, then at the child and last at the woman -- and kill them, end the problem, turn the tableau in the kitchen into the blood-spattered scene she knew so well. They'd lie there, still, parts of their bodies torn away by her blasts. They'd look just the same like all the other. Just the same. Always the same. She lowered her gun. "Run," she said. "Grab what you most need, and just run. Leave the city. Go."

The man and the woman looked at each other. They looked confused, but at least she had enough sense not to question good luck. She lifted her daughter up and hurriedly left the kitchen, leaving the frying meat to burn. "Why?" the man said.

"I got tired of everything being the same," she said. "Now leave before I change my mind."

He left. She stood there, gun in hand until she heard them leave. By then, the kitchen was full of foul-smelling smoke, and it was a relief to get out in the rain again.

Back at the Federation military compound, she used her override code and walked straight into Kasabi's quarters. She heard the shower run, so she went straight into the huge bathroom that belonged to the commanding officer's suite. "I have to get out," she said and stepped into the ridiculously oversized shower booth without even stopping to take her boots off. "I just can't do this any more."

"Calm down," Kasabi said. "And if you're going to stay in the shower, take your clothes off."

"Huh? What?" She looked down at herself. "Oh. Sorry." She started unbuttoning her coat.

"Now tell me what the problem is."

She started out haltingly, talking bits and pieces of her thoughts. As her clothes fell to the floor and the hot water began to warm her up, she got more coherent. Once she

was naked and Kasabi held her head to her bosom, comforting her, she started to cry and her words lost meaning again. "I hoped for this," Kasabi said when Thania had finished telling her about her lost faith in the cause of the Federation. "It happens to more of us than you'd think. And since they trained us to be sneaky, it happens a *lot* more often than they know about."

"What? What happens?" Thania raised her head and looked at her lover, her mentor.

"We see too much," Kasabi said. "We see what it's like out here, outside the steel walls of Earth. And when we've seen that we look back in again, and we find what we see there lacking." She stroked Thania's cheek. "That is the heart of your confused tale, isn't dear? You've killed so many different people, and almost all of them you found so much more fascinating than your fellow Federation citizens. You're starting to regret killing them, you want to talk to them instead, get to know them."

Thania nodded. "You remember I said I'm leaving?" Kasabi asked.

Thania nodded again. "That's why. I can't stand it any more either. I'm going to try and change it, by changing the minds of some who may be our future leaders."

Thania sat down with her back to the wall, pulling at Kasabi so she followed her down. The water from the shower heads wasn't quite so hot down here, but it still felt good. "You said that you could get a position for me too," she said.

"Actually, now that you feel this way, maybe you'd like to help me?"

She leaned onto Kasabi, the solid presence calming her. "How?" she asked

"Apply for a position with the judiciary office. They'll almost certainly accept, they need all the officers they can get. Help me from in there. Tell me when they'll be going after those we want to protect, help defend them, do whatever you can."

"Ok," she said. "I'll do that."

She closed her eyes, let the water run over her face. She felt Kasabi nibble tenderly at her ear, and she smiled. She turned around so she faced her lover and started kissing her way down from the base of her throat. Kasabi stroked her head. "Hmm, that's nice...," she mumbled. "We'll have to finish this planet off, though," she said. "You see that, don't you?"

Thania swirled the tip of her tongue over a rapidly stiffening nipple before she answered. "Oh yes," she said. "At least there's one thing in that that I'm looking forward to."

"I'm looking forward to dragging you into bed," Kasabi said. "This position is killing my back. Come here, love."

She stood up, lifting Thania in her arms as if she was a child. "I'll kiss your bad dreams away," she said, "and together we'll make the universe a better place."

Hidden from sight by rain and night and from hearing by the howling of the enraged mob by the main gates, Thania quickly climbed over a part of the Federation Embassy's fence that only she knew wasn't currently activated. She strolled across the yard to the entrance, attached the business end of a breaker to the visible part of the lock system and fried it. Sparks burst out at several places around the doors, and they flew open. She waited for a few moments until the security guards inside came to check what was going on, and when they did she shot them. Stepping over their crumpled bodies, she entered the lobby. "You people local?" she said to the three servants waiting to receive guests. They all nodded, obviously frightened.

"Any of you know where the security station is?"

One of them, a middle-aged man, nodded again. "Good," she said. She took the ID

badge from one of the dead guards and threw over to him. "Use this to get into the room, then say 'trojan horse' in the main microphone. Can you do that?"

"Sure," he said. "What will happen when I do?" he asked.

Thania smiled. "All the Embassy's security systems will shut down, and all the doors will lock open. I'd say it'd be a good idea for you and the other employees to get out through the back entrance as fast as you can, because that mob out there will be coming in and they won't discriminate between you locals and us."

The three of them looked at each other for a few moments, and then they ran, two of them towards the back and the man she'd given the badge towards the security station. So far, so good. She ran up the stairs to the ambassador's office, shooting another guard on the way. She stopped outside the door, listening. She heard voices. "You have to help here *first*, major! That's an order! We can't afford to lose the embassy, it'd be a publicity disaster."

"I am the military commander here, ambassador," she heard Kasabi's voice, slightly distorted through the communicator. "You can't give me orders. My instructions are to protect the presidential palace and the military base first. I'll get troops to you when those are secured. Don't worry, it won't take very long."

"Damn you, major, they're beating down the gates even as we speak. Just get some troops here, kill some of them. The rest will leave when they see we're serious."

"I doubt that, ambassador."

"Look, just get some troops here, will you? Can you even imagine what the reaction would be back home if the locals destroyed the embassy?"

She'd intended to wait until the power was turned off, but this was too good a moment to waste. She kicked open the door and shot the communicator. "Yes, ambassador, I rather think she can," she said, smiling and aiming the gun at him.

"Oh no," he said as realization dawned.

She slowly walked up to his desk, aim never wavering. "I'm not really sure how to do this," she said. "Shooting you would be safest, of course. The locals will pick up guns from the dead guards on their way here, so it'll still look like they did it. On the other hand, it won't look very interesting in the news."

The tensing of his muscles told her that he'd try to bolt to her left. "Strangling you would mess up the face too much. Appropriately gross, but you wouldn't be recognizable enough."

He darted to her left side, past the side of the desk and tried to get past her. She kicked his knee, hard, from the side and made it bend in a way it never had before. It made crackling sounds as cartilage broke and tendons snapped. The ambassador fell, screaming. "And then, I could just mix and match different sorts of damage until you die or I run out of time."

While she spoke, the lights flickered out. Emergency lighting came on, filling the room with sickly red light. The barely heard wailing of the mob increased in volume and acquired a jubilant tone. He tried to grab her ankle, so she shot his hand, turning it into a mess of burnt flesh and scorched bone. Two fingers remained on the floor when he moved his arm. "It seems I don't have very much time. Oh well."

She put the gun away and drew a knife. Quickly, she sliced open his belly and pulled out his intestines, spreading them over the floor. He was well into shock by now, had stopped screaming and only moved feebly. She wiped the blade on his shirt and looked at the scene. Yes, definitely gory enough to cause a public outrage. Time to leave. She kicked him in the neck, snapping it. He twitched, and then was still. The sounds of the mob was getting stronger. By now it sounded as if they were

in the stairway, which meant that she had less than a minute left. Quickly, she tightened the harness sewn into her jumpsuit and ripped away a thin layer of cloth from the back of it, revealing the outer layers of the built-in parachute. She took out the gun again and shot out one of the panorama windows, shielding her eyes from splintered plastic with her arm. Wind and rain tore into the room.

They were very close now. For a moment, she thought about staying until they arrived. She'd stand here, a black-clad figure in the darkness, and apologize to them. She'd confess to murder, to the cold-blooded assassination of their entire culture. But no. They were already dead, they just hadn't stopped moving yet. Sacrificing herself wouldn't help. She'd do more good by trying to work against that which she had spent her entire life so far working for. Besides, she still wanted to live.

One step, another one, a jump up onto the desk, yet another step, a *jump* and she dove out the broken window. Cold rain hit her like a soft wall, winds threw her around like a doll. Only meters away, the ragged cliff face sped past, waiting for her to hit it and spread her precious life's blood along it. Her parachute snapped out, slowed and stabilized her. She pulled the lines, steering away from the rock wall. All around her was rain and wind. The world was gone, she was in a dark grey nowhere of primal forces. She felt like it was cleansing her, washing away a lifetime of sins so that she could be reborn into the world again, reborn as a rebel. She began to laugh, but after just a few breaths she was no longer sure if she was laughing or crying. The rain flowing down her face felt like tears.

Screaming in joy, sadness and exhilaration, she fell back into the world.

*As you approach the door to the cell, it opens. You see the telltale light on the camera go out, and you feel sure that the microphones are inactivated as well. You move into the cell, and you see Kasabi. Your lover. Your mentor. Your mother in spirit. She looks tired, old and frightened. Seeing her like this feels like a knife turning in your innards. She looks up at you, and you see shock in her eyes for a moment before she controls herself. She was always very good at that.*

*"So soon?" she says. "I thought I would have to face the interrogators before you came. I guess I should be glad I didn't have to."*

*Briefly, you loosen the mask and show her your face. Seeing the flash of hope that passes over her face as she recognizes you is an almost physical pleasure. She starts to say your name, but you put a white-gloved finger on her warm, soft lips to prevent her. Maybe they didn't really turn the cameras and microphones off, after all. You put the mask back on, and through its oh-so-safe safe voice scrambler you dare talk to her. "Come with me," you say.*

*"Always," she says, and she looks twenty years younger than she did when you entered the cell. Together, you leave it and walk down the corridors. You have figured out a good route to the storeroom where you ordered the things delivered, and it seems you are lucky today, because you meet not a single soul on your way there. "There," you say, pointing at a large brown crate in a corner. "It's a disguised escape pod. In two hours it will be shipped to Earth. It should be enough to keep you alive and sane until you get there."*

*She smiles. "The memory of this will keep me for much longer than that," she says. "Let me kiss you before we part again. I could not bear being this close to you and not get to do that."*

*How could you possibly refuse a request like that? You take the mask off, and she comes into your arms. She feels smaller than she used to, but she still smells like the*

woman you remember, she still tastes like her, her lips still feel those of times long gone. You take a glove off and stroke her cheek, run your fingers through her short hair. "Farewell, my love," you say. "Hurt the bastards."

"I'll do my best," she says. "I think I'd better get into my pod now, you never know when someone might walk by."

You nod. She's right. You open the crate, revealing its padded and technology-filled interior. Kasabi crawls into it, and the last you ever see of her is her eyes above the breather as you close the crate behind her. You check that nothing unusual is left behind. Nothing is, so you leave. You walk away quickly. There is much for you to do, and you have no idea how many days you have left to do it. They may be many. They may be few. You know only that they are limited, that one day there will be a knock on your door and when you open you'll see the Laughing Man waiting for you. One day you will stare into his white, grinning face, and you will be every bit as scared as everyone else he ever came for. One day, this will happen. One day.

But not today.